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ABSTRACT

This publication is intended for teachers bringing a class to visit the National Archives in Washington, D.C., for a workshop on primary documents. The National Archives serves as the repository for all federal records of enduring value. Primary sources are vital teaching tools because they actively engage the student's imagination so that he or she may visualize past events and make sense of their reality and meaning. This publication describes two primary documents found at the National Archives: the cotton gin patent and a "map of the United States Agreeable to the Treaty of Peace of 1783." Photographs of both documents are included as are exercises for students. (DB)

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An Introduction to the Records
of the National Archives

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FOR THE TEACHER

Thank you for arranging the primary document workshop "The Glory and Romance of our History are Here Preserved" for your class. For too many students, history is just an endless string of dates and events chronicled in a textbook. Primary sources actively engage the student's imagination so that he or she may visualize past events and sense their reality and meaning. Before your workshop, it would be advantageous to introduce your students to primary sources with the poster-size documents and the attendant exercises we have provided. The exercises may be photocopied and should be adapted to fit your objectives and teaching style. We hope that these preliminary materials and our workshop will enhance your class's understanding and appreciation of one of the United States' great cultural treasures, the National Archives.

What is the National Archives?

Established in 1934, the National Archives helps preserve our nation's history by serving as the repository for all federal records of enduring value. It thus serves the federal government, researchers of many topics, and the American public. Because the federal records reflect and document more than 200 years of American development, the records in the National Archives holdings are great in number, diverse in character, and rich in information.

Before your students participate in a tour or a workshop, they should be familiar with the mission of the National Archives. We recommend that you present your students with the following vocabulary words and questions:

- Please define Archives, Archivist, Document, Record, Preservation.
- Why do you and your family save documents? Why are they important?
- The U.S. government keeps its records in the National Archives. Why does the government save its records?
- What kinds of records might the U.S. government want to save?
- What famous documents are at the National Archives?

You will be called by the National Archives docent assigned to your class about a week before the date of your tour or workshop. If the workshop will be held in your classroom, then please be prepared to relay information concerning directions, parking, and school check-in procedures.

Whether it is our Behind-the-Scenes Tour or one of our Primary Document Workshops, we are confident that the experience will provide an exciting new look at history. In order to assess our performance, we would appreciate your cooperation in completing the enclosed evaluation form and returning it in the self-addressed stamped envelope provided.

If you have any additional questions regarding your tour or workshop, please contact the Volunteer and Tour Office Staff at 202-501-5205.

The Cotton Gin Patent

Most visitors to the National Archives quickly perceive the importance of our resources for the history of American politics and government. But very few realize that the National Archives is an equally fascinating resource for the history of American science and technology. The 200-year-old history of American know-how re-

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sides within the files of the U.S. Patent Office. Due to its dramatic impact on the course of American history, the patent drawing of Eli Whitney's cotton gin holds a special place among these files that few examples of Yankee ingenuity can rival.

Invented by Eli Whitney in 1793, the cotton "gin" (for "engine") was a machine for extracting the seeds from cotton. It revolutionized the southern economy, and in doing so, it perpetuated and expanded the pernicious institution of slavery. As a recent Yale College graduate, Whitney had gone south to be a tutor to the children of Catherine Littlefield Greene, the widow of Revolutionary War general Nathanael Greene. While on Mrs. Greene's plantation in Georgia, Whitney saw how well short-staple cotton grew in the southern uplands. He also saw that a slave had to labor a whole day to remove the seeds from a pound of cotton to make it usable for thread or cloth. Known to be mechanically inclined, Whitney was urged by Mrs. Greene to invent a better way to extract the seeds. Within 10 days he constructed a device that consisted of two cylinders rotating in a box. The rows of wire teeth attached to the first cylinder caught the fibers, and a second cylinder, rotating in the opposite direction, pulled the cotton from the wires. The seeds were separated and left behind.

By April 1793, a person operating a gin could clean 50 times more cotton in a day than a person working by hand. Although Whitney's invention was patented on March 14, 1794, it never proved profitable for him because his machine design had already been pirated. Southern planters were reluctant to pay for the gin, and later when Congress refused to renew Whitney's patent, he remarked that "an invention can be so valuable as to be worthless to the inventor."

The document on the front of your poster is a copy of the cotton gin patent drawing. It provides you with an excellent opportunity to discuss with your class the impact of technological innovation on American society. Explain to your students that the real beneficiary of the gin was not its inventor but rather the South and its economy. Production of short-staple cotton became highly and consistently profitable. Cotton could now be cultivated throughout most of the region, and the South became the world's leading cotton exporter. Also explain that the gin reinvigorated the institution of slavery, which had been on the decline since the wellspring of abolitionist sentiment during the Revolution. Plantations needed workers to plant, cultivate, pick, and "gin" the cotton. Black slaves seemed the obvious labor source, and slavery became "necessary" for southern prosperity. The resurrection of the "peculiar institution" eliminated any hope that some of the Founding Fathers had for its eventual demise. Finally, explain that technological innovation produced a profitable cash-crop economy that spurred planters to seek more land for cotton growing in the western territories. The institution of slavery would follow "King Cotton" into these new territories, and this pattern would eventually create more "slave" than "free" states. The Civil War would ultimately resolve this politically intolerable situation.

"Map of the United States... Agreeable to the Treaty of Peace of 1783"

Not all history in the National Archives is found in written records. Much of the history of America's expansion and development can be seen in the approximately 2 million maps and charts in our Cartographic and Architectural Branch. The copy of "AN ACCURATE MAP OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA with Part of the SURROUNDING PROVINCES agreeable to the Treaty of Peace of 1783" on the back of your poster is an excellent example of how our cartographic holdings provide a unique visual dimension to many of the significant events in our nation's history. The significant event in this case is the Treaty of Paris negotiated in 1783 between England and the United States, which officially ended the Revolutionary War and recognized American sovereignty.

Peace talks commenced in April 1782, after the French and American victory at Yorktown led to the collapse of Lord North's intransigent Tory government. The new government, under the direction of the dovish Whig prime minister Lord Rockingham, intimated early on that there would be "no veto to the independence of America." The American delegates to the talks — Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and John Jay — had been instructed by the Continental Congress not to initiate anything without the knowledge and consent of the French government. The French Foreign Minister, the Comte de Vergennes, expected the Americans to coordinate their diplomatic strategy with the French as well, but the American delegates distrusted the French attachment to their cause and pursued an independent course in spite of Congress's instructions.

Vergennes was not overly worried by the independent maneuvering of the American delegates. After all, any Anglo-American agreement would not go into effect until France had concluded a separate peace treaty with Great Britain. Finally, on September 3, 1783, Great Britain and its enemies, France, Spain, and the United States, signed peace treaties.

The American delegation had achieved a notable victory. Great Britain now had to acknowledge American independence, a point pressed most strongly by John Jay. In the process, Britain ceded to the United States all territory between the Allegheny Mountains on the east and the Mississippi River on the west, doubling the size of the new nation. The American delegation also attempted to incorporate Canada within the boundaries of the new United States, but in this they failed. If Spain had had its way, however, America's western boundary would have been the Appalachian Mountains. Another British concession, pursued fervently by John Adams, was access for American fishermen to the Grand Banks and other traditional fisheries in Canadian waters. For its part, the United States agreed to use its powers to end the persecution of Loyalists and to restore Loyalist property confiscated during the war. Both nations agreed not to obstruct creditors collecting on debts owed to them.

The Treaty of Paris map provides you with an excellent opportunity to focus on the creation, expansion, and geography of the United States. Instruct your class to examine the map carefully and to read the articles or terms of the treaty as well. Next, discuss with your class what geographic features were used to form the borders between British territory and that of the United States (the Great Lakes and part of the St. Lawrence River). Also, ask them whether or not natural features form the boundaries with Spain. (One was the Mississippi, for instance. Others, such as the southern border with Spanish West Florida, were along a line of latitude.) Let your students discover that the southern border is too straight and regular to be naturally occurring.

Exercise I:

The Patent Drawing of the Cotton Gin

Examine the drawing and consider the gin's mechanical function.

1. Who invented the cotton gin? _____
2. On what date was the cotton gin patent issued? _____
3. How did the "gin" (short for "engine") work? _____

4. Do you think the inventor of the "gin" became wealthy as a result of his creation?

5. How did the cotton gin change the southern economy?

6. Was the institution of slavery affected by the cotton gin?

7. How did the cotton gin help accelerate the western expansion of the United States?

8. Consider for a moment how technology (VCRs, computers, compact discs, for example) affects you. The cotton gin was a technological innovation that affected the lives of all Americans. Overall, was its effect on the nation positive or negative? Why or why not?

Exercise II:

"Map of the United States agreeable . . . to the Treaty of Peace of 1783"

Examine and compare the map with a present map of the United States. Be sure to read carefully articles I, II, and III of the Treaty of Paris.

1. What does article I state? _____

2. What was the northern boundary of the United States according to the map and article II?

3. What river formed the western boundary of the United States? _____

4. What was the land beyond the western boundary called? _____

5. List the names of three American Indian tribes. Where were they located?

6. Was Florida part of the United States in 1783? If not, to whom did it belong?

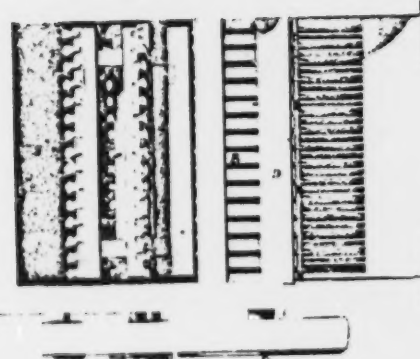
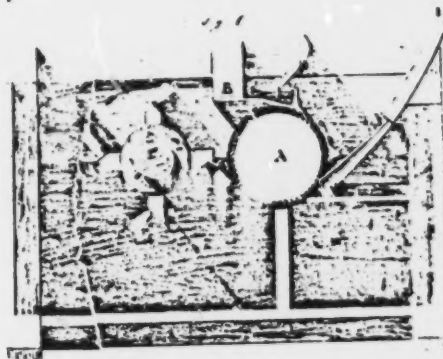
7. Can you locate Maine or Vermont? If not, what were those areas called in 1783?

8. According to article III, where were Americans allowed to fish? Where could they cure or dry their catch of fish?

9. Why were fishing rights an important part of the Treaty of Paris of 1783?

W. H. H. H. H. H.
Cotton Gin

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Patent Drawing of the Cotton Gin
National Archives

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"Map of the United States agreeable . . . to the Treaty of Peace of 1783"
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